# Child to parent violence when the child uses drugs or alcohol

## Adfam and AVA briefing 1: Parents

### 1. Background to the project and key findings

This briefing explores how parents can be victims of abuse from their substance using children. The phrase child – parent violence (CPV) is used, although other phrases describing the same thing also exist, such as 'family violence' or 'parent abuse'. Whether you are familiar with all or none of these doesn't matter. CPV is used to describe behaviour which constitutes domestic violence or abuse from a child (either under 18 or an adult child) to a parent and may include behaviours from the following categories:

a) Physical abuse (kicking, spitting, hair pulling, choking, slapping etc.)

b) Emotional/psychological abuse (insulting, belittling, bullying etc.)

c) Sexual abuse (sexual name calling, exposure to inappropriate materials, sexual assault etc.)

d) Financial abuse (controlling budgets, denying victim access to funds, fraud, identity theft, blackmailing victims for money etc.)

e) Coercive control (social isolating victim, shutting down horizons, controlling who the victim sees, scaring off friends and neighbours etc.)

Adfam and AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) conducted a joint project in 2012 to consult parents who had experiences of CPV. We spoke to 88 parents around the country whose children used drugs and alcohol and perpetrated abuse, whether physical or emotional, against them.

### 2. CPV - how families are affected

- Any parent can be affected by abusive behaviour from their child and any parent could end up with a child who uses drugs or alcohol problematically. Although nobody ever thinks it'll happen to them, evidence indicates that substance use and CPV cuts across all social boundaries.
- Effects of CPV include stress, anxiety, depression, loss of sleep, physical injury and admission to hospital, financial troubles and prolonged family conflict.
- This is an issue which, to varying degrees, affects lots of parents, who are typically very reluctant to admit to what is happening to them - to professionals, family and sometimes friends too. Parents reported feeling affected by two forms of stigma – firstly they were parents to a substance using child and secondly that their child was abusing them. Many parents find it hard to talk to others about what is going on – this is normal. **You are not alone – there are many people going through similar experiences.**

It's completely understandable that most parents find it hard labelling what they are going through as abuse. If you are not sure if what you are experiencing is normal or if it's abuse, ask yourself if you'd put up with the behaviour from a friend. Sometimes people are so bogged down in their own situations that they lose any sense of perspective and what should be abnormal becomes normalised.

- Is the abuse always a direct result of abuse or hardship as a child? No. Exposure to domestic violence as a child can be a traumatising experience but it does not 'make' someone became an abuser. Many boys have a terrible childhood spent trying to defend their mother and other siblings from an abusive father but use their experiences to grow into men who would never perpetrate violence against a partner.

  Others may learn that 'violence works' or that violence is a normal part of relationships between men and women. Child exposure to domestic violence is not a reliable indicator of future behaviour.

- Child to parent violence is in many ways similar to partner violence (violence between current or ex adult partners). It exists in the same way as an attempt by a perpetrator to manifest power and control over a victim in order to attain a goal – whether that goal is control in and of itself or something specific like money to buy drugs.

- Parents have generally reported a mix of reactions when they've looked for help. They turned to friends, family members and GPs most commonly, although some also looked to the church, the police, social services and others. Some services were reported as excellent and some awful. One parent told us they have 'the best GP in the world' and others told us their GPs lacked either the time, inclination or knowledge needed to help. Similarly the police were found to be very useful by some parents, and hopeless by others. Some parents had close friends they could turn to, whilst others felt unable to talk to their friends and family. **There is no standard pathway to help – you must use the support that *you* find useful.**

**3. How substance use affects perpetrators of CPV**

- **Is it just the drugs/alcohol talking and the person losing control?** No. Although the use of drugs or alcohol may trigger certain types of abusive behaviour, the CPV is about power being asserted and control maintained. There is evidence to support this: physical abuse is often targeted at areas of the body that are not easily seen by strangers (such as the abdomen); the abuser will often destroy the possessions of the victims (rather than their own as might be more likely in an uncontrollable fit of rage); and the abuser will refrain from attacking other potential targets such as friends or strangers in school or the pub. CPV is a pattern of behaviour, towards which one contributing factor is drug and alcohol use. Other factors may include: bullying, mental health issues, parenting style, peers and school, a lack of impulse control in adolescents which develops more fully in adults.

- **Will the abuse stop if the substance use stops?** Not necessarily. It might seem like the abuse is a direct result of the drug or alcohol use and sometimes this may be the case. However it's not enough to assume that if your child gets help for their drug or alcohol

use the abuse will definitely stop – besides, getting help for them may take a long time or many attempts. You need help for you *and* for them.

**4. Where to go for help**

- The national domestic violence helpline run by Refuge and Women's Aid is available 24 hours a day for victims – 0808 2000 247. They can advise on cases of child – parent violence.
- Find a family support group – Adfam has a map of support groups around the country which offer support for families affected by drug and alcohol use. Whilst attending these cannot replace an appropriate intervention to challenge the perpetrator's behaviour these groups can provide both effective emotional support and practical coping strategies. Many parents find these groups fantastic sources of support.
- Families Anonymous offer a helpline for any family member affected by drug and alcohol use. Ring on 0845 1200 660.
- Domestic violence agencies – if your child is aged 18 or over (or 16 and over from March 2013) then any domestic violence agency in your area will be able to support you just as they support victims of partner violence. Your local authority website should be able to signpost you to local services.
- Your GP may be able to help with some of the consequences of abuse such as sleeplessness, depression or stress. It may also help if you access some emotional support for yourself. Ask your GP for information about counselling services on the NHS (for instance as part of the IAPT scheme). Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT) and Assessment and Brief Intervention teams may also be able to provide some psychological interventions.
- There is no universal service to help if your child is aged under 18 (or under 16 from March 2013) but social services may be able to provide parenting support and possibly access to a parenting programme. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) may also be able to work with your child.
- If you believe that you or any member of the family is at immediate risk of physical danger from the abuser then you should call the police at once. It doesn't matter that the abuser is your child or they are aged under 18 – you are still entitled to call the police for protection and the police can arrest any child aged 14 or over if necessary.

**5. Resources**

- Adfam produce a range of guides called Journeys. One of these is specifically for parents whose children use drugs. Adfam provide resources free to parents on when your child uses drugs. You can ring on 020 7553 7640 to obtain a copy.

- Find out more about drugs – If you are worried about your child's drug use but don't know much about drugs it's good to educate yourself. FRANK is the government run website and education campaign – it is nominally for young people but is a good source of basic info for anyone looking for information. You can ring on 0800 77 66 00.

The Club Drugs Clinic is the first ever treatment centre in the UK dedicated to helping problematic users of club drugs (ecstasy, MDMA, powder cocaine, crystal meth, GBL/GHB, mephedrone, legal highs). If you think your child has a problem with one of these drugs give them the phone number for the Club Drug Clinic (020 3315 6111) – they can ring and speak anonymously to an expert. They can also be emailed on clubdrugclinic.cnwl@nhs.net.